

# Out of Sync in a Competitive World

## Keynote Address

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Are you gifted if no one can see it? Some would say no, you are only gifted when you do something others deem remarkable. When giftedness is removed from the competitive realm of recognized achievement, it becomes clear that it is a form of atypical development, which leads to unique experiences throughout the life cycle.

What exactly is giftedness? This topic is mired in controversy and mythology. These are some of the perennial misconceptions with which the gifted, their parents and their advocates must contend:

- ✚ Is there such a thing as giftedness?
- ✚ Aren't all people gifted in some way?
- ✚ Doesn't this type of labeling give a child a swelled head?
- ✚ Are programs for gifted children elitist and undemocratic?
- ✚ Can't smart kids make it on their own?
- ✚ Won't the other kids catch up eventually?
- ✚ Does giftedness disappear or cause untimely death ("Early ripe, early rot")?
- ✚ Are people with unusual gifts born with some sort of compensating handicap?
- ✚ Is there a link between giftedness and insanity?
- ✚ Is the notion of giftedness obsolete? Shouldn't we be talking instead about talents in different domains or multiple intelligences or expertise developed through years of effort and practice?

Few topics engender such strong reactions. While it is comfortable to acknowledge that some individuals are less intelligent than we are, the idea that some individuals are smarter than us poses an emotional threat to the insecure (Persson, 2009). Tannenbaum (1983) discloses the history of "persistent undercurrents of suspicion and negativism"—widespread resentment—toward those who are highly intelligent (p. 3). The gifted are lonely in a world of misunderstanding.

In the United States, it is not uncommon to hear an educator say to a parent in a patronizing tone, "We believe *all* our children are gifted." While all children are a gift to the world, saying, "all children are gifted," robs the term of any meaning. It would be equally absurd to say, "We believe *all* our children are intellectually disabled." Individuals with impaired intellectual development, whose intelligence measures 2, 3 or 4 standard deviations below the norm, deal with specific psychological issues. The same is true for those who are developmentally advanced, with IQ scores 2, 3, 4 or more standard deviations above the norm. Those whose abstract reasoning is significantly keener than the majority have qualitatively different life experiences and qualitatively different psychological needs.

Does a "gift" imply an obligation? Many of the arguments in favor of educational provisions for the gifted are based on the value of this group to society. Researchers from The Netherlands rightly call this a *utilitarian* view of giftedness. Gifted education is marketed as an investment in future leaders. "In current thinking in

giftedness and education, the utility value reigns and the intrinsic value of the gift is virtually nonexistent” (Besjes-de Bock & de Ruyter, 2011, p. 205). Prized as a utility, the gifted are expected to yield a return on society’s investment that is advantageous to the social order. Little attention is paid to their inner lives; “emotions are of minor importance” (p. 199). While some gifted children covet the goal of achieving high grades and crave the accolades of success in school and adult life, others march to their own drummers. One mother wrote:

*We say that A doesn’t march to the beat of a different drummer—she has her own band.*

### **Is Giftedness the Potential for Eminence?**

A recent movement in the field of gifted education in the United States equates giftedness with recognized achievement. “Outstanding achievement or eminence should be the chief goal of gifted education” (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011, p 3). This is not a new initiative. Howard Gardner (1983) ushered in a host of achievement-oriented definitions of giftedness. In 1992, David Feldman called for a “paradigm shift,” which replaced the term “gifted” with “talented” and urged us to abolish IQ testing. Why? Because IQ tests do not predict fame.

Defining giftedness as eminence is the legacy of Sir Frances Galton. Galton inaugurated the study of giftedness in 1869 with the publication of his book, *Hereditary Genius*. He ranked men according to the prestige they had attained as statesmen, commanders, literary figures, men of science, poets, musicians, and painters. He selected men whose biographies were accessible. His plan was to show that reputation is an accurate test of high ability, and that unusual ability runs in families (particularly his family: his cousin was Charles Darwin). “By reputation, I mean the opinion of contemporaries, revised by posterity—the favourable result of a critical analysis of each man’s character, by many biographers...” (Galton, 1869, p. 33).

As Galton suggests, it is not possible to accurately assess the impact of a life until the person isn’t living any more and other people are writing about him (or her, but most biographies are about men). So we should wait until people die to determine if they were gifted? This “posthumous” determination of giftedness is not particularly useful for selecting and serving gifted children, or for nourishing their emotional growth.

The equation of giftedness with eminence has built-in sexist, cultural, socio-economic, and racial biases. Women, all nationalities, all racial and ethnic groups and all socio-economic levels are not equally represented among the eminent (Silverman, 2013). Not all cultures value individual recognition. Eminence is a competitive concept—not a universal goal.

Galton’s notions were challenged a century ago by Leta Stetter Hollingworth, who argued that eminence is largely the result of opportunity, closely linked to social position in the society, and generally inaccessible to women.

If opportunity were indeed the prime determinant of eminence, then we should expect those who belong to socially inferior categories to be excluded from it. This is just what we do find, since the uncultured, the poor, servants, and women are very seldom found to have achieved eminence. (Hollingworth, 1926, p. 11)

It is undesirable to seek for the cause of sex differences in eminence in ultimate and obscure affective and intellectual differences until we have exhausted as a cause the known, obvious, and inescapable fact that women bear and rear the children, and that this has had as an inevitable sequel the occupation of housekeeping, a field where eminence is not possible. (Hollingworth, 1914, p. 529)

How does this view serve children? There are no eminent children. If you were identified as gifted in childhood and you do not become eminent, does that mean that you were never gifted in the first place? The disconnection between giftedness in childhood and giftedness in adulthood is illogical and does not exist in any other branch of exceptionality.

Rather than asking what children need who are developing differently, the emphasis has shifted to a totally different question: “What does it take to become successful?” Many popular journalists in the United States preach that everyone is equally endowed with intelligence, and, therefore, everyone has an equal opportunity for success (e.g., Gladwell, 2008). In Scandinavia, some researchers assert that there are no differences in ability. It’s all about practice, practice, practice (Ericsson, 2006).

The doctrine that we all have equal intelligence sounds deliciously seductive in fiercely egalitarian societies, but is it true? Are we really all the same? For the last century, we have extensive research documenting vast differences in intelligence in the population. Ignoring this research is destructive to gifted children and adults.

## **A Psychology of Giftedness**

I see giftedness as a psychological reality. It can be observed in very young children and documented on measures of general intelligence. The capacity for abstract thought, insightfulness, compassion, sensitivity, perfectionism, intensity, creative imagination, sophisticated sense of humor and unusual energy typify the gifted individual throughout the life span and result in unusual life experiences. These lifelong characteristics mark the gifted as outsiders in society, and make them vulnerable.

It is apparent that a person does not “outgrow” giftedness, any more than anyone outgrows significant intellectual disability. The issues faced by this group in childhood simply morph into new variations in adults. Even highly successful individuals often feel like imposters waiting to be unmasked. In The Netherlands, more than any country in the world, you recognize the difficulties faced by gifted adults in the work place and in their relationships. Several of you offer coaching and counseling for clever, complex, autonomous, curious, passionate, sensitive, creative, emotionally rich adults. Maud van Thiel, Dr. Noks Nauta and their associates have

formed the Gifted Adults Foundation (IHBV). Willem Kuipers offers Ximension for individuals with extra intelligence and extra intensity—“Xi.” You have books, articles, websites, blogs and support groups. You have no idea how unusual and forward thinking you are to offer services for gifted adults. Only a few practitioners in the United States have this level of awareness, and there are no agencies except our Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, which publishes *Advanced Development Journal*. We have published an article by Willem Kuipers, talking about how he charms gifted adults into admitting they are gifted by using the term, “Xi.” We would welcome articles from all of you who work with gifted adults.

Giftedness is color-blind (it occurs in all races), gender-blind (it is found in equal proportions in males and female and in those who are not gender-identified) , is present in all cultures, and is distributed across all socio-economic levels. There are many more gifted children in the world living in poverty than those who are wealthy (Zigler & Farber, 1985).

Giftedness indicates significantly different needs from the norm; it requires early identification, intervention and accommodations to assure healthy development. In contrast to popular beliefs, the gifted do not make it on their own. Most hide and underachieve. Some commit suicide. And some “tall poppies” are beheaded to preserve the fiction that we are all alike.

My book, *Giftedness 101*, is an attempt to re-establish giftedness as a legitimate branch of the field of psychology. Every other exceptionality has been embraced by psychology, but this child has been abandoned. Gifted education (at least in the United States) is focused on how successful these students are in school. It does not address the inner life of the gifted. The only psychological aspect considered is motivation.

I realize that most of you want the children you work with and live with to strive for excellence. But giftedness is not a competition. When we award gifted children for their accomplishments, the prize can compromise the pure joy of doing what they do well. External rewards undermine intrinsic motivation. We want gifted children to love learning their entire lives, we want them to strive for their personal best for themselves rather than to please others, and we want them to use their abilities to help others. We want them to know that they are cherished for who they are, not for their A’s or their awards. If this resonates, we need to go beyond external recognition, beyond excellence, to really see, support and nurture our gifted young.

My friend, Rosemary Cathcart, in New Zealand, sent me an essay entitled, “Beyond Excellence.” We just posted it on our website last week:  
<http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/blogs/bobbie-and-lindas-blog/beyond-excellence-introduction-linda-silverman>. Rosemary reminds us that,

“Gifted individuals go *beyond* excellence. They are driven by their inner vision of what they are seeking to do or accomplish. They set their own criteria for the fulfillment of that vision. They may know despair and failure many times in their journey towards that end. What they are striving to do may *not* be readily comprehended by those around them, not at that time. Yet what they ultimately bring

us sets new parameters for our knowledge and for our insight and understanding of ourselves and of our world.”

If excellence is our objective, we must recognize the many paths gifted individuals may take to achieve their own goals and we must honor their uniqueness.

Appreciating and nurturing the individuality of all children with whom you work is best way to help them achieve excellence. This means supporting their intensity, sensitivity, passion, curiosity, autonomy and complexity.

Gifted children are wired differently from others. These outliers show us the range of human abilities and illuminate the possibilities of human development. No one doubts the existence and special needs of individuals who are intellectually disabled.

Intellectually able children are simply the other side of that coin. It is time to take giftedness out of the closet, to recognize and support it, and to allow the gifted in our societies to feel safe and whole being exactly who they are.

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